

NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Mountain-Prairie Region
134 Union Boulevard
Lakewood, Colorado 80228**

For Immediate Release
June 1, 2011

Contact: Laura Romin 801-975-3330 ext 142

SERVICE PROPOSES TO AMEND TAKE ALLOWANCES FOR THE UTAH PRAIRIE DOG

Public Comments Will Be Accepted Until August 2, 2011.

Today, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed amendment to the protective regulations for the Utah prairie dog (*Cynomys parvidens*). The existing special rule which we propose to amend was established in 1991. The Utah prairie dog is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

“The proposed amendment will provide for the conservation and recovery of the Utah prairie dog. If finalized, landowners would benefit from take allowances for standard agricultural practices. Proposed limitations would minimally impact landowners as they are largely consistent with Utah Division of Wildlife Resource’s past practice,” said Stephen Guertin, Regional Director of the Service’s Mountain-Prairie Region.

Under section 4(d) of the ESA, the Secretary may extend to a threatened species through a “special rule” those protections deemed necessary and advisable to provide for the conservation of the species. When the Utah prairie dog was downlisted to threatened, we issued a special rule applying all of the ESA’s prohibitions to Utah prairie dog except: take of up to 5,000 animals was allowed annually between June 1 and December 31 in Iron County, Utah. In 1991, we amended the special rule to allow regulated take of up to 6,000 animals annually between June 1 and December 31 on agricultural lands throughout the species’ range.

These rules were intended to relieve population pressures in overcrowded portions of the range that could not otherwise be relieved. The rules indicated that agricultural practices were making the habitat more productive than it was historically, thus allowing the prairie dog population to achieve unnaturally high densities. The resulting overpopulation pressures increase the risk of sylvatic plague (*Yersinia pestis*) outbreaks. The rules also concluded that removing individuals during summer when populations were highest would reduce competition in overpopulated areas resulting in increased overwinter survival among remaining animals. Finally, these rules indicated control was needed to minimize impacts to agricultural operations and prevent widespread illegal killing by frustrated farmers.

Under the existing special rule, take is permitted by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR). The UDWR has never authorized the current rule’s maximum allowed take and has exercised caution to ensure any permitted take is consistent with the species’ recovery needs.

For the most part, this proposal would institutionalize existing UDWR practice regarding: where permitted take can occur; the amount of take that can be permitted; and methods of take that can be permitted. A new incidental take exemption is also proposed for otherwise legal activities associated with standard agricultural practices.

Public comments or data on the proposed rule will be accepted until August 2, 2011. Comments or data can be submitted: electronically via the Federal eRulemaking Portal at: <http://www.regulations.gov> (search the docket for FWS-R6-ES-2011-0030), or can be mailed or hand delivered to Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R6-ES-2011-0030; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.

A copy of the proposed rule and other information about the Utah prairie dog is available on the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/UTprairiedog/index.htm> or by contacting Utah Field Office at 2369 West Orton Circle, West Valley City, Utah 84119 (telephone 801/975 3330; facsimile 801/975-3331. The proposed rule will be published in *Federal Register* on June 2, 2011.

The Utah prairie dog is the western most member of the genus *Cynomys* and has the most restricted range of the four prairie dog species in the United States. Historically, the species' distribution included portions of Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, Juab, Millard, Piute, Sanpete, Sevier, Washington, and Wayne Counties. Utah prairie dog populations began to decline when control programs were initiated in the 1920s, and by the 1960s the species' distribution was greatly reduced as a result of poisoning, sylvatic plague (a nonnative disease), drought, and habitat alteration induced by agricultural and grazing activities. Today, Utah prairie dogs are limited to the central and southwestern quarter of Utah in portions of seven counties -- Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, Piute, Sevier, and Wayne Counties

The Utah prairie dog was listed as an endangered species in 1973. In 1984, we reclassified the species as threatened. Primary threats are habitat loss from urban development and loss of prairie dog colonies from plague outbreaks.

Utah prairie dog populations are stable to increasing. Recent population estimates are among the highest recorded since listing. Specifically, five of the seven highest years recorded since 1985 have occurred since 2005.

As a keystone species, prairie dogs have a large effect on the ecosystem. Prairie dogs decrease vegetation height and increase landscape heterogeneity. Burrowing and excavation mixes the soil and promotes uptake of nitrogen by plants. The burrow and mound systems change soil chemistry by increasing the porosity of the soil to allow deep penetration of precipitation, and increasing the incorporation of organic materials into the soil. Several wildlife species such as burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*), rabbits (*Lepus spp.*), ground squirrels (*Spermophilus spp.*), weasels (*Mustela spp.*), and badgers (*Taxidea taxus*) also rely on the habitat conditions created by Utah prairie dog colonies, and frequently use their burrows.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are

both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwshq, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>